

We claim:

1. A method of processing airline ticket sales, comprising the steps of:
  - obtaining a purchase offer for travel from a customer, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition including a price;
  - identifying one or more rules from a plurality of sellers of airline tickets, each of said rules containing one or more airline-defined restrictions; and
  - comparing said purchase offer to said rules to determine whether any of said sellers of airline tickets is willing to accept said purchase offer if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said airline-defined restrictions.
2. The method according to claim 1, wherein said purchase offer is binding.
3. The method according to claim 1, wherein said airline-defined restrictions include a price and said price is not disclosed.
4. The method according to claim 3, further comprising the step of preventing said customer from identifying said price.  
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5. The method according to claim 1, further comprising the step of providing an acceptance of said purchase offer to said customer if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said airline-defined restrictions.
6. The method according to claim 1, wherein said customer-defined conditions include a specified itinerary.
7. The method according to claim 6, wherein said specified itinerary includes an indication of acceptable origin and destination cities for said travel and acceptable dates and times of departure and return.

8. The method according to claim 1, further comprising the step of binding said customer to purchase said airline ticket if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said airline-defined restrictions.

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9. The method according to claim 1, wherein at least a portion of said rules are stored by one or more remote servers.

10. The method according to claim 9, wherein said step of comparing said portion of

said rules is performed by said one or more remote servers.

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11. The method according to claim 1, wherein one or more of said airlines has an associated revenue management system and wherein said rules for said airline are generated by said associated revenue management system.

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12. The method according to claim 1, further comprising the step of generating a counteroffer if one or more of said sellers of airline tickets does not accept said purchase offer and said purchase offer is within a predefined tolerance of at least one of said rules.

13. The method according to claim 1, further comprising the step of selecting said rules to discourage use by customers typically willing to pay full fare.

14. The method according to claim 1, wherein said rules define a combination of said airline-defined restrictions for which an airline is willing to accept a predefined fare.

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15. A method of processing airline ticket sales, comprising the steps of:

obtaining a binding purchase offer for travel from a customer, said binding purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition;

identifying one or more rules from a plurality of sellers of airline tickets, each of said rules containing one or more airline-defined restrictions; and

5 comparing said binding purchase offer to said rules to determine whether any of said sellers of airline tickets is willing to accept said binding purchase offer if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said airline-defined restrictions.

16. The method according to claim 15, wherein said airline-defined restrictions include  
10 a price and said price is not disclosed.

17. The method according to claim 16, further comprising the step of preventing said  
customer from identifying said price.

15. The method according to claim 15, further comprising the step of providing an  
acceptance of said purchase offer to said customer if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said  
airline-defined restrictions.

19. The method according to claim 15, wherein one or more of said airlines has an  
20 associated revenue management system and wherein said rules for said airline are generated by said  
associated revenue management system.

20. The method according to claim 15, further comprising the step of generating a  
counteroffer if one or more of said sellers of airline tickets does not accept said purchase offer and  
25 said purchase offer is within a predefined tolerance of at least one of said rules.

21. The method according to claim 15, further comprising the step of selecting said rules to discourage use by customers typically willing to pay full fare.
22. The method according to claim 15, wherein said purchase offer includes a 5 customer-defined price.
23. The method according to claim 15, wherein said rules define a combination of said airline-defined restrictions for which an airline is willing to accept a customer-defined price.
- 10 24. A method of processing airline ticket sales, comprising the steps of:  
obtaining a purchase offer for travel from a customer, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition; A  
identifying one or more rules from a plurality of sellers of airline tickets, each of said rules containing one or more airline-defined restrictions including a price;  
comparing said purchase offer to said rules to determine whether any of said sellers of airline tickets is willing to accept said purchase offer if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said airline-defined restrictions; and  
preventing said customer from identifying said price.
- 15 25. The method according to claim 24, wherein said preventing step comprises the step of limiting the number of said purchase offers which may be obtained from a given customer in a predefined period.
- 20 26. The method according to claim 24, wherein said preventing step comprises the step 25 of assessing a penalty to said customer if a ticket is not booked when an airline accepts said purchase offer.

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27. The method according to claim 24, wherein said preventing step comprises the step of evaluating a rating of said customer containing information regarding the likelihood that said customer will book a ticket corresponding to said purchase offer.

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28. The method according to claim 27, wherein said rating comprises a ratio of bookings to purchase offers by said customer.

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29. The method according to claim 24, wherein said preventing step comprises the step of binding said customer to purchase said airline ticket if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said airline-defined restrictions.

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30. A system for processing airline ticket sales, comprising:  
means for obtaining a purchase offer for travel from a customer, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition including a price;  
means for identifying one or more rules from a plurality of sellers of airline tickets, each of said rules containing one or more airline-defined restrictions; and  
processing means for comparing said purchase offer to said rules to determine whether any of said sellers of airline tickets is willing to accept said purchase offer if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said airline-defined restrictions.

31. The system according to claim 30, wherein said purchase offer is binding.

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32. The system according to claim 30, wherein said airline-defined restrictions include a price and said price is not disclosed.

33. The system according to claim 30, further comprising the step of providing an acceptance of said purchase offer to said customer if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said airline-defined restrictions.
- 5 34. The system according to claim 30, further comprising means for binding said customer to purchase said airline ticket if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said airline-defined restrictions.
- 10 35. The system according to claim 30, further comprising one or more remote servers for storing at least a portion of said rules.
- 15 36. The system according to claim 30, further comprising a revenue management system associated with one or more of said airlines and wherein said rules for said airline are generated by said associated revenue management system.
37. The system according to claim 30, further comprising means for generating a counteroffer if one or more of said sellers of airline tickets does not accept said purchase offer and said purchase offer is within a predefined tolerance of at least one of said rules.
- 20 38. The system according to claim 32, further comprising means for preventing said customer from identifying said price.
39. The system according to claim 38, wherein said means for preventing comprises means for limiting the number of said purchase offers which may be obtained from a given customer in a predefined period.

40. The system according to claim 38, wherein said means for preventing comprises means for assessing a penalty to said customer if a ticket is not booked when an airline accepts said purchase offer.
- 5 41. The system according to claim 38, wherein said means for preventing comprises means for evaluating a rating of said customer containing information regarding the likelihood that said customer will book a ticket corresponding to said purchase offer.
- 10 42. The system according to claim 38, wherein said rating comprises a ratio of bookings to purchase offers by said customer.
- 15 43. The system according to claim 38, wherein said means for preventing comprises means for binding said customer to purchase said airline ticket if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said airline-defined restrictions.
44. A method of processing the sale of airline tickets, said method comprising the steps of:  
providing a plurality of seats for sale to customers who submit a purchase offer for travel, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition including a price;  
20 establishing airline-defined restrictions that are applicable to said provided seats including an appropriate fare; and  
providing said airline-defined restrictions to a processor to determine whether to accept said purchase offer if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said airline-defined restrictions.
- 25 45. The method according to claim 44, further comprising the step of obtaining a reservation for one or more of said provided seats if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said

airline-defined restrictions.

46. The method according to claim 44, wherein said step of providing a plurality of seats further comprises the step of allocating a fare class containing said plurality of seats for sale to said customers who submit said purchase offer.

47. The method according to claim 44, wherein said purchase offer is binding.

48. The method according to claim 44, wherein said establishing step is performed by 10 an associated revenue management system.

49. The method according to claim 44, further comprising the step of establishing rules for generating a counteroffer if said purchase offer is within a predefined tolerance of at least one of said airline-defined restrictions.

50. The method according to claim 44, further comprising the step of selecting said 15 airline-defined restrictions to discourage use by customers typically willing to pay full fare.

51. A system for processing the sale of airline tickets, said system comprising:  
20 means for providing a plurality of seats for sale to customers who submit a purchase offer for travel, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition including a price;

a revenue management system for establishing airline-defined restrictions that are applicable to said provided seats including an appropriate fare; and

25 means for providing said airline-defined restrictions to a processor to determine whether to accept said purchase offer if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said airline-defined restrictions.

52. The system according to claim 51, further comprising means for obtaining a reservation for one or more of said provided seats if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said airline-defined restrictions.

53. The system according to claim 51, wherein said revenue management system allocates a fare class containing said plurality of seats for sale to said customers who submit said purchase offer.

54. The system according to claim 51, wherein said purchase offer is binding.

55. The system according to claim 51, wherein said revenue management system further comprises means for establishing rules for generating a counteroffer if said purchase offer is within a predefined tolerance of at least one of said airline-defined restrictions.

56. The system according to claim 51, wherein said revenue management system selects said airline-defined restrictions to discourage use by customers typically willing to pay full fare.

57. A method of purchasing airline tickets, comprising the steps of:  
providing a purchase offer for travel, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition including a price; and  
obtaining a reservation for said travel on an airline at said price if said customer-defined conditions satisfy airline-defined restrictions including an appropriate fare.

58. The method according to claim 57, wherein said purchase offer is binding.

59. The method according to claim 57, wherein said appropriate fare is not disclosed.
60. The method according to claim 57, further comprising the step of obtaining an  
5 acceptance of said purchase offer if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said airline-defined  
restrictions.
61. The method according to claim 57, wherein said customer-defined conditions  
include a specified itinerary.
- 10 62. The method according to claim 61, wherein said specified itinerary includes an  
indication of acceptable origin and destination cities for said travel and acceptable dates and times  
of departure and return.
- 15 63. A method of managing airline inventory, comprising the steps of:  
providing a plurality of seats for sale to customers who submit a purchase offer for  
travel, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition including a price;  
establishing airline-defined restrictions that are applicable to said provided seats  
including an appropriate fare; and
- 20 providing said airline-defined restrictions to a processor to determine whether to  
accept said purchase offer if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said airline-defined  
restrictions.
64. The method according to claim 63, wherein said steps of providing said seats and  
25 establishing said restrictions are repeated to reevaluate the allocation and pricing of available  
inventory in response to actual demand.

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65. The method according to claim 63, wherein said processor can sell said provided seats to a customer who has submitted a purchase offer, if said purchase offer contains customer-defined conditions which satisfy said airline-defined restrictions.

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66. The method according to claim 63, wherein said step of providing a plurality of seats allocates those seats on a given flight that are unlikely to be sold by said airline.

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67. The method according to claim 63, wherein said step of providing a plurality of seats includes the step of analyzing the difference between forecasted and actual demand for a given flight and allocating excess capacity for sale to said customers who submit a purchase offer.

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68. A method of processing the sale of goods or services, comprising the steps of:  
obtaining a purchase offer from a customer for the purchase of said goods or services, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition including a price;  
identifying one or more rules from a plurality of sellers, each of said rules containing one or more seller-defined restrictions including a price; and  
comparing said purchase offer to said rules to determine whether any of said sellers is willing to accept said purchase offer if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said seller-defined restrictions.

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69. The method according to claim 68, further comprising the step of providing an acceptance of said purchase offer to said customer if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said seller-defined restrictions.

70. The method according to claim 68, further comprising the step of binding said customer to purchase said goods or services if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said seller-

defined restrictions.

71. The method according to claim 68, wherein said seller-defined restrictions include a price and said price is not disclosed.

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72. The method according to claim 71, further comprising the step of preventing said customer from identifying said price.

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73. The method according to claim 72, wherein said preventing step comprises the step of limiting the number of said purchase offers which may be obtained from a given customer in a predefined period.

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74. The method according to claim 72, wherein said preventing step comprises the step of assessing a penalty to said customer if said customer does not purchase said goods or services if a seller accepts said purchase offer.

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75. The method according to claim 72, wherein said preventing step comprises the step of evaluating a rating of said customer containing information regarding the likelihood that said customer will purchase said goods or services corresponding to said purchase offer.

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76. The method according to claim 75, wherein said rating comprises a ratio of purchases to purchase offers by said customer.

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77. The method according to claim 72, wherein said preventing step comprises the step of binding said customer to purchase said goods or services if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said seller-defined restrictions.

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78. The method according to claim 68, wherein one or more of said sellers has an associated inventory management system and wherein said rules for said seller are generated by said associated inventory management system.

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79. The method according to claim 68, further comprising the step of generating a counteroffer if one or more of said sellers does not accept said purchase offer and said purchase offer is within a predefined tolerance of at least one of said rules.

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80. The method according to claim 68, further comprising the step of selecting said rules to discourage use by customers typically willing to pay the retail price for said goods or services.

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81. The method according to claim 68, wherein said rules define a combination of said seller-defined restrictions for which a seller is willing to accept a predefined price.

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82. A method of processing the sale of a goods or services by a seller, comprising the steps of:

providing a plurality of goods or services for sale to customers who submit a

purchase offer, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition;

establishing seller-defined restrictions that are applicable to said goods or services including an appropriate price; and

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providing said seller-defined restrictions to a processor to determine whether to accept said purchase offer if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said seller-defined restrictions.

83. The method according to claim 82, further comprising the step of selling said goods or services to a customer if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said seller-defined restrictions.

84. The method according to claim 82, wherein said purchase offer is binding.

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85. The method according to claim 82, wherein said establishing step is performed by an associated inventory management system.

86. The method according to claim 82, further comprising the step of establishing rules 10 for generating a counteroffer if said purchase offer is within a predefined tolerance of at least one of said seller-defined restrictions.

87. The method according to claim 82, further comprising the step of selecting said 15 seller-defined restrictions to discourage use by customers typically willing to pay the full retail price.

88. A method of processing the sale of goods or services, comprising the steps of: 20 obtaining a purchase offer from a customer for the purchase of said goods or services, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition;

identifying one or more rules from a plurality of sellers, each of said rules containing one or more seller-defined restrictions including a price;

comparing said purchase offer to said rules to determine whether any of said sellers is willing to accept said purchase offer if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said seller-defined restrictions; and

25 preventing said customer from identifying said price.

89. The method according to claim 88, wherein said preventing step comprises the step of limiting the number of said purchase offers which may be obtained from a given customer in a predefined period.
- 5 90. The method according to claim 88, wherein said preventing step comprises the step of assessing a penalty to said customer if said goods or services are not purchased when a seller accepts said purchase offer.
91. The method according to claim 88, wherein said preventing step comprises the step  
10 of evaluating a rating of said customer containing information regarding the likelihood that said customer will purchase said goods or services corresponding to said purchase offer.
92. The method according to claim 91, wherein said rating comprises a ratio of purchases to purchase offers by said customer.
- 15 93. The method according to claim 88, wherein said preventing step comprises the step of binding said customer to purchase said goods or services if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said seller-defined restrictions.
- 20 94. An article of manufacture comprising:  
a computer readable medium having computer readable code means embodied thereon, said computer readable program code means comprising:  
a step to obtain a purchase offer for travel from a customer, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition including a price;  
25 a step to identify one or more rules from a plurality of sellers of airline tickets, each of said rules containing one or more airline-defined restrictions; and

a step to compare said purchase offer to said rules to determine whether any of said sellers of airline tickets is willing to accept said purchase offer if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said airline-defined restrictions.

5 95. An article of manufacture comprising:

a computer readable medium having computer readable code means embodied thereon, said computer readable program code means comprising:

a step to obtain a purchase offer for travel from a customer, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition;

10 a step to identify one or more rules from a plurality of sellers of airline tickets, each of said rules containing one or more airline-defined restrictions including a price;

a step to compare said purchase offer to said rules to determine whether any of said sellers of airline tickets is willing to accept said purchase offer if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said airline-defined restrictions; and

15 a step to prevent said customer from identifying said price.

96. An article of manufacture comprising:

a computer readable medium having computer readable code means embodied thereon, said computer readable program code means comprising:

20 a step to obtain a purchase offer from a customer for the purchase of said goods or services, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition including a price;

a step to identify one or more rules from a plurality of sellers, each of said rules containing one or more seller-defined restrictions including a price; and

25 a step to comparing said purchase offer to said rules to determine whether any of said sellers is willing to accept said purchase offer if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said seller-defined restrictions.

97. An article of manufacture comprising:

a computer readable medium having computer readable code means embodied thereon, said computer readable program code means comprising:

5 a step to obtain a purchase offer from a customer for the purchase of said goods or services, said purchase offer containing at least one customer-defined condition;

a step to identify one or more rules from a plurality of sellers, each of said rules containing one or more seller-defined restrictions including a price;

10 a step to compare said purchase offer to said rules to determine whether any of said sellers is willing to accept said purchase offer if said customer-defined conditions satisfy said seller-defined restrictions; and

a step to prevent said customer from identifying said price.

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